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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002233

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SUBJECT: PREAH VIHEAR: GBC TALKS END IN STALEMATE

REF: BANGKOK 2207 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) Thailand derived no definitive results from the July 21 General Border Committee (GBC) meeting with Cambodia, according to our MFA and military sources. The highest levels of the RTG were discussing possible next moves, an MFA official told us, although he declined to elaborate on what these may be other than to emphasize Thailand's desire that the dispute remain a bilateral issue between Thailand and Cambodia. Director of Joint Intelligence, Royal Thai Armed Forces Headquarters, Lieutenant General Surapong Suwana-adth told an invited gathering of the military attache corps (excepting the Cambodian defense attache) on July 22 that the Thai military did not want to see an increase in tension. Despite the highly politicized nature of the issue, Surapong did not view it as a military problem and stated that he continued to work closely with his troops and his Cambodian counterparts to prevent any accidental military flare-ups. However, the uneasy standoff between Thai and Cambodian armed forces would continue, with Thai government officials refusing mediation by ASEAN and both sides refusing to withdraw their troops. The GBC agreed to meet again in August. Although press reports described Thai villagers in the area preparing to 'hunker down,' sources told us that local administrators remain calm. Overall, the July 21 meeting may have produced a diplomatic deadlock, but it appeared to give military leaders from both sides the opportunity to exchange views and reinforce existing communications. MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul has asked us to come in to discuss Preah Vihear on the afternoon of July 23. We will urge consultation and caution.  
End Summary.

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GBC YIELDS NO IMMEDIATE RESULTS  
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¶2. (C) The July 21 General Border Committee meeting made little headway in resolving the sovereignty dispute between Thailand and Cambodia in the area of the Preah Vihear temple,

stated Thai military and MFA officials in multiple conversations throughout the day on July 22. Director of Joint Intelligence Lieutenant General Surapong told a meeting of Bangkok-based military attaches (minus Cambodia's) that the GBC began with serious prospects for a written agreement to come out of the meeting. However, an afternoon bilateral meeting reversed the progress (NFI) achieved during a mid-day session and the end result was that after eight hours of negotiations, the two sides walked away without a significant agreement. In a separate conversation with Embassy representatives, Surapong stated that he did not view the GBC meeting as a failure, but rather part of the ongoing process to resolve the matter.

13. (C) MFA Department of East Asian Affairs Counselor Mongkul Visitsump confirmed Surapong's readout of the GBC meeting. He added that neither side conceded to withdraw troops from the temple complex and surrounding areas, but that both countries had agreed to demonstrate self-restraint when it came to the use of their respective military forces and pledged to prevent further politicization of the issue. Mongkul made it clear that Thailand saw no need for mediation by ASEAN or any other third party, but instead preferred the matter to remain a purely bilateral one with Cambodia. For this reason, Thailand had tried to derail Cambodia's request for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council on Preah Vihear. However, Mongkul did note that Thailand planned to raise the matter during a July 22 working lunch of ASEAN Foreign Ministers scheduled to take place in the context of the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Singapore.

14. (U) Royal Thai Armed Forces Supreme Commander General Boonsrang Niumpradit led Thailand's negotiating team, accompanied by Army Commander General Anupong Paojinda, Army

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Chief of Staff General Songkitti Chakkrabat, Border Affairs Department Director-General Lieutenant General Niphat Ehnical and MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul.

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NOT A MILITARY PROBLEM  
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15. (C) Surapong frankly told the Attache Corps on July 22 he considered the current escalation of events to be the result of Thai and Cambodian domestic political agendas (namely, those relating to the Cambodian national election on July 27 and the ongoing efforts of anti-government forces in Thailand). He emphasized that Thailand would continue to address the Preah Vihear matter using existing frameworks, such as the GBC but that, given the current political climate in both countries, neither side could expect a quick resolution.

16. (C) While generally refusing to comment on the sovereignty issues surrounding Preah Vihear temple and the surrounding area, Surapong referenced an MOU signed by both countries in 2000 wherein they agreed "not to carry out any work resulting in changes of environment of the frontier zone, pending the survey and demarcation of the common land boundary" (Article 5 of the 2000 MOU). Surapong stated that Thailand had respected the MOU, but Cambodians had violated it when they established a Cambodian "squatter" village at the base of the temple complex.

17. (C) Separately, Colonel Natchanok Teeptanon, Aide de Camp of the 2nd Army Area Commander, told us that the situation along the border remained calm and stable after the GBC meeting. He described Thai and Cambodian troops sharing food and talking amicably with each other. The Thais have noted that Thai and Cambodian troops in the border area knew each other well and have good cross-border communication. Surapong also emphasized that the border units were in good communication with higher commands, and he was confident that conditions at the border (e.g., an accidental weapon

discharge) would not result in escalation beyond the national authorities' control.

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TROOPS REMAIN AT PRE-MEETING LEVELS  
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18. (C) According to Surapong, Thailand continued to maintain approximately 500 soldiers in the immediate vicinity of Preah Vihear, with Cambodia having a similar number on the other side of the border. The Thai forces included army rangers for whom the Preah Vihear area is part of their regular area of operations. Various Thai demining troops are also in the area. Both military forces were supplied with light arms and rocket propelled grenades. July 22 Thai press articles claimed that about 2,400 Thai military forces remained in nearby areas to supplement those positioned the temple complex, although Natchanok declined to confirm the exact number of troops to us.

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LOCAL SENTIMENT CAUTIOUS BUT CALM  
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19. (C) Local press reported that Thai villages near the Preah Vihear temple complex had prepared for the possible exchange of fire between Thai and Cambodian soldiers by digging bunkers and conducting school evacuation drills. Local administrators remained optimistic that the RTG would successfully negotiate a resolution to the conflict and the possibility of armed confrontation is not causing panic among the villagers, Sisaket province ISOC intelligence officer Lieutenant Phatthanaphong Saengphuwa told us on July 22. Phatthanaphong stated that area sub-district heads and village headman assured Phatthanaphong that they would not make any movements that would exacerbate the situation. While politicians in the capital remain preoccupied by claims of sovereignty, Thai media quoted Thai vendors near the temple as more concerned about lost revenues since the RTG declared the site off limits to tourists.

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COMMENT  
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10. (C) Thai officials continue to hold fast to their sovereignty claims with no indication they expect a quick resolution to the matter. However, the Thai military clearly appears keen to prevent the political tensions from escalating into any kind of military clash with Cambodia. MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi has called us in on July 23 to discuss Preah Vihear. We will urge that all diplomatic steps be taken to resolve the issue as well as efforts to avoid inadvertent military confrontation.  
JOHN